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Forest of Struggle: Moralities of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia

EVE MONIQUE ZUCKER

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, 256p.

Eve Zucker's book, *Forest of Struggle* is an important contribution to the literature on societies in the aftermath of extreme violence and specifically to the study of Cambodian society since the Khmer Rouge era. The book is ethnography, but not in the classical style of a snapshot in time of a single village; it tells the story of two villages, set on the margins of Khmer society, on the "edge of the forest." It belongs in a category with such important books as Linda Green's *Fear as a Way of Life* (about Guatemala) on the one hand, and Anna Tsing's *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* on the other—stories of violence, fear, and displacement, but told from a local grounding. Zucker describes other studies of "social memory" as arguing that violence continues to influence the present as people "reinterpret their memories in efforts to cope with the violence of their past" (p. 11); but she would expand this discussion to include issues of morality and the remaking of the moral and social order. The memories she focuses on are primarily collective and are shaped by local history, including the way that local stories are re-told, and how these stories are tied to features of the landscape.

The area of Cambodia where Zucker conducted research, the two communes she calls Prei Phnom and Doung Srae, are up against the mountains, an area viewed by lowlanders, the French colonial authorities, and subsequent state governments, as a haven for bandits and rebels. The Khmer Issarak (including the "White Khmer") and Vietnamese anti-French forces used the area as a base in the 1940s and 50s, and the community was divided between those who sought protection from these groups higher up the mountains, and those who went down to seek safety in the government controlled areas. This pattern would be repeated; in 1970 the Khmer Rouge arrived and many people fled with them to the forest. Many of the men from the area fought with the Khmer Rouge against the Lon Nol regime between 1970 and 1975. Others again descended to the plains and fought on the government side. During this period, people informed on one another; Lon Nol forces assumed everyone in the area were Khmer Rouge, but the Khmer Rouge accused people of being "White Khmer" under Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey. In Prei Phnom com-

muned these accusations and killings were so rampant that most of the adult males were murdered. Zucker eventually learns the “public secret” that the villagers live with the memories of this internal betrayal, and that overwhelmingly they blame one man who was the village headman at that time.

Perhaps the best chapter is the one on “Trust and Distrust”; while Zucker is told when she arrives in the village that everyone “loves one another” she also hears people habitually say that they do not trust people and situations. Zucker reviews theoretical work on the concept of trust, including importantly that of Giddens and Appadurai, and the limited comparative work on the topic in Southeast Asia. An obsession with seeking out internal enemies was central to Khmer Rouge ideology, Zucker discusses the effect constant surveillance and accusations had on families and other social groups. She writes: “In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the distrust was sustained, rationalized and reproduced, creating a warped logic whose logical conclusion could only be total annihilation” (p. 54). The destruction of social institutions, from the local temple to kinship groups, that characterized the Khmer Rouge period sadly does not end for the residents of this area after 1979. Instead during the second civil war that follows, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and Vietnamese forces still distrust the survivors, as do the Khmer Rouge. For another 20 years people remain insecure; while an accusation is no longer cause for automatic execution, people were accused and killed for other reasons, including “sorcery.” Like the Khmer Rouge logic of destroying “bad elements,” the label sorcerer—as a kind of outcast—justifies the killings. Citing Appadurai, Zucker writes that “violence fixes otherwise murky identities and creates a sense of order” (p. 63). Even up to the present day, the fact that a black market trade in forest products continues through the area maintains a heightened sense of distrust, particularly of strangers and representatives of state authority. Zucker places herself within the text, as another initially distrusted outsider; but uses her gradual acceptance in the community as one tool for exploring the reformulation of social trust in the community.

Zucker devotes two full chapters to Ta Kam, the former village headman accused by his fellow villagers of betraying their relatives to the Khmer Rouge and thus causing their deaths. The kindly looking, grandfather figure who now serves as a Buddhist lay officiant at a temple in the other commune, presents himself as a passive victim of circumstances. But his fellows see his actions as self-serving, designed to distinguish himself in the warped context where finding and killing enemies was the path to advancement. Zucker observes that while Ta Kam is blamed, his family is not and in fact his daughter enjoys warm social relations—even though the wider social pattern in Khmer society is to see relatives as also to blame, or as risks since they may seek revenge (the Khmer Rouge killed entire families in line with this logic). Instead, here Zucker contends that by placing the blame only on Ta Kam, the villagers, (many of whom are also his relatives by marriage or blood,) allow for healing. The continual search for who to blame is shut down by placing the blame squarely on one person.

Further, Ta Kam himself is not seen as innately wicked or evil, but as a person who performed immoral acts. He is discussed as amoral, or morally ignorant; he lacked the ability to tell right from wrong. Zucker links this to the modern Buddhist notion of *Satisampajania*, the ability of moral discernment. Zucker then sets this discussion of understanding Ta Kam's motivations within the wider literature on the concepts of face, patronage, merit, and sacrifice. Ta Kam gained face, demonstrated competence, provided services in exchange for protection by offering up his fellows. Now pious late in life, he seeks to gain merit to improve his next life, as elders often do. No one in the village seeks revenge by killing Ta Kam; instead they shun him socially and thereby erase him and his wrong doings. Zucker writes, "Since he is not the only one of his generation guilty of crimes, it is therefore the wrongdoings of the generation as a whole that have the potential to be forgotten" (p. 113).

Zucker continues with chapters on the distinction between "wild" and "civil" and processes of creating and sustaining communities; and on mountains and memory about how moral stories are embedded into features of the landscape. These stories, multiple and conflicting, tell of earlier ideal times when people were honest and "clear" and therefore capable of seeing magical secrets in the forest. She writes that communities tell their histories through collective narratives wherein re-ordering takes place. The story villagers tell about an invasion by the Thai more than a century ago is repeated, the patterns of its telling echo in the way that Khmer Rouge era stories are told. The stories are recast to "reflect current interests and predicaments"—told differently across the two communes and by different individuals.

And finally, in the chapter "Bon Dalien," Zucker tells of seeing a sense of community spirit that she would not have believed existed in Prei Phnom play out in the organization and enactment of this village festival. She uses this event to address the issue in the literature on Cambodia on whether social relations from the prewar years remain "atomized" or destroyed, or whether they have been reconstituted. Her findings suggest that a community's ability to reconstitute itself in the aftermath of violence "will depend on its particular socio-historical past—prior to, during and after the violence" (p. 152). In Prei Phnom commune the aftermath of the festival did not yield a "heightened sense of solidarity" but rather "emptiness" (p. 167). Zucker does not accept either the notion that social relations have recovered nor the over simplistic idea that they have been destroyed. The festival serves at least partly to help negate the destruction of people and their traditions by offering a "counter-memory" that may well help to "ease the residual fear and distrust" (p. 170).

In a short epilogue, Zucker raises the issue of the possible effects of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal on these issues and processes, since the very Western goal of the tribunal is to establish an official "memory" that will be accepted as a single "truth." She also finds that in 2010 Ta Kam is increasingly accepted in the village as a younger generation is growing up knowing him only as the grandfatherly Buddhist elder.

The shortcomings of the book are few. Zucker might have engaged more with the literature on memory from the Holocaust, including whether certain kinds of trust and ideas of security can ever be restored. The book would be very useful in a range of different courses. I teach a Mainland Southeast Asia course that uses a selection of ethnographies from across a 50-year period to teach the history of the region as well as this genre. Zucker's book offers insight into yet another stage in the development of the ethnography, "village" life without a fixed or reified set of customs, lived on the margins of the wider culture and set within a historical context not of stability, but of conflict and suffering. The book could be used in courses on violence and social memory, on conflict resolution, and on life in contemporary Southeast Asia. Like most excellent anthropological studies, Zucker's work teaches us significant lessons about what it means to be human.

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The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah: Encounters, Mobilities, and Histories along the Malaysian-Thai Border

IRVING CHAN JOHNSON

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012, 223p.

"One's identity . . . is never static" (p. ix). Irving Chan Johnson's *The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah* goes deep into anthropological "thick description" to highlight how "messy" collective identities along the northeastern Malaysia-Thai border are. Focusing on ideas of fluidity and movement Johnson identifies the border as a space for exchanges—commercial, cultural, political—rather than as an imprisoning parameter. It is on these foundations that *The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah* addresses the question of Thai ethnics' marginality in Kelantan through the lens of "interactive experiences that encounters across the boundaries bring about" (p. xiv).

The book unfolds thematically, as Johnson identifies five analytical categories, each investigated in a substantial chapter. These are themselves subdivided in multiple snapshots illustrating the life of Ban Bor On and its villagers. This is the product of 18 months of fieldwork, but it is also much more than that. Johnson has been visiting Ban Bor On since 1979, as this is his own mother's